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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001426

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN; DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2019

TAGS: EAGR ELAB PGOV SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: COTTON STILL MOSTLY HAND PICKED, BUT
NOT BY CHILDREN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4 (B) a
nd (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Embassy officers visited all five provinces of Turkmenistan in the fall to monitor cotton harvesting. Based on what they saw, the government appears to be serious about its ban on the use of child labor during the cotton harvest. While the Turkmen have replaced some hand picking with new cotton combines, the majority of cotton is still hand picked, which results in the highest quality cotton and the highest yield. Most of the harvesting is done by women. Until the government provides greater incentives to farmers, cotton production will not likely increase. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy officers, as part of Post's regional travel program, visited Turkmenistan's five velayats (provinces) between the end of September and beginning of November to observe cotton harvest. In Mary province, Emboff was in the city of Mary and traveled east to Bayramaly. In Lebap province, Emboff traveled south of the capital city of Turkmenabat (formerly Charjew) about 30 miles to the city of Sayat, and also traveled north through Serhetabat and Garashsylyk regions. In Dashoguz, Emboff drove north to Kone Urgench and also drove south to Ismamut Ata, which is on the edge of the Kara Kum desert. Emboff in Ahal province visited Gok Depe and Baharly. Emboff in Balkan province traveled through the Serdar region on his way to Balkanabat (formerly Nebitdag).

OUTLOOK FOR THIS YEAR'S HARVEST

¶3. (C) Although the government had set this year's target for cotton production higher than last year's, information that Embassy officers gathered indicates that this year's cotton harvest will be less than the government hoped. In Mary province, locals told Emboff that spring rains hurt the crop, and some fields even had to be reseeded, meaning that the growing season was shorter than it should have been. In Dashoguz province, Emboff observed that there were bare

patches in some of the cotton fields where there should have been plants growing, and that the cotton plants were only about three feet tall. In Lebap province, Emboff noticed that the land was intensively farmed, with cotton planted even in the small patches between the road and non-arable land, and in Balkan province Emboff saw that the cotton plants growing near the canal looked robust, but further away the plants did not look as big.

MAJORITY OF COTTON PICKERS ARE WOMEN

¶4. (C) In all regions, the majority of people picking cotton by hand were women. In Balkan and Ahal provinces, Embassy officers also saw groups of men wearing uniforms in the fields. No children were seen picking cotton, although in Ahal and Mary provinces Poloffs noticed that some of the women had young children with them. In Dashoguz province, Emboff was told that teachers spent one or two hours every morning picking cotton, so the students would not be in school. Often the students would be around the fields, but they were not picking cotton. Embassy officers were told by a variety of people that children were forbidden from picking cotton. In Dashoguz province, the mayor of a four-town area told Emboff that children were no longer allowed to pick cotton, and in Mary province the local driver told Emboff the same. However, residents of a rural area outside of Mary told Emboff that children help with cotton picking after school. An Embassy contact in Lebap, a journalist, rented three hectares of land in order to raise cotton and his whole family was involved in the harvest. He said that if he hired people, then he would have to pay them. Children help with

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the family's harvest, but only after school, on weekends and holidays. He stated firmly that school authorities do not send children to pick cotton. During school hours, parents would not allow their children to work. The practice of school children being sent to pick cotton took place five years ago, when schools would close for two months for the cotton harvest. "Now, that absolutely does not happen." Now only parents send their children to work, voluntarily. Sometimes children want to pick cotton in order to earn extra money.

¶5. (SBU) In some provinces authorities appear to be replacing child labor with combines. An official in the Mary province governor's office said that during the week of September 14, no cotton was yet being picked because a defoliant was being sprayed in the cotton fields, which needed to sit for two weeks. Once the leaves had fallen off the cotton plants, then the machines could be brought in to harvest the cotton. The official implied that only machines were being used to pick cotton in Mary. Emboff saw spraying machines in several fields on September 17-18, and very few people picking cotton. In Balkan province, the Serdar region mayor told Emboff that the majority of cotton in Serdar was picked using John Deere or Case cotton harvesters. Emboff counted over 50 machines in a large lot in Serdar. Similarly, the mayor of the four-town area in Dashoguz province told Emboff that John Deere and Case machines were being used to pick cotton, although Emboff did not see the combines himself. However, in Lebap province, Emboff was told that the first harvests are done by hand, with harvesting by machine done only at the end, because when a combine harvests, it knocks a lot of cotton blossoms to the ground, ending any subsequent harvest.

FARMERS ARE JUST MAKING ENDS MEET

¶6. (C) Individuals usually lease cotton fields from state farms. The individuals rent between one-half to ten hectares of land, depending on their resources. Typically, there are 2-3 harvests of the same field, but there can be as many as five, because the cotton buds ripen at different times and depending on how much work the renter wants to do. A large family could handle two hectares. During the harvest,

renters invite family and relatives to assist. Cotton pickers receive 20 tenne (seven U.S. cents) per kilogram picked. The amount of cotton an individual picks varies greatly depending on experience. City dwellers who pick cotton to make some extra money might pick 30 kilograms per day, whereas an agricultural worker could pick up to 150 kilos in one day. The journalist contact in Lebap province said that the world market price for one ton of cotton is currently \$1,000, and renters receive between \$150-200 per ton. To harvest three hectares of cotton in one day takes about 20-25 people. He added that the income from a cotton harvest provides enough money for a family to eat, but not enough to build a house, for example.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: It seems unlikely that Turkmenistan is increasing its cotton production every year, despite government pronouncements to that effect. Most people raising the cotton are just making ends meet, and so they do not have resources to invest in better equipment or to increase their own knowledge of agricultural methods. Nor do they have the incentive, since they do not own their land, and the majority of the money from sales goes to the government. However, the government does seem to be making an honest effort to eliminate child labor during the harvest. The willingness of people to work in the cotton fields is a clear sign of the desperate economic conditions in rural areas. END COMMENT.

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